The narrow alleyway reeked of stale cigarettes and industrial grease, the acrid stench clinging to the back of Tomura Shigaraki's throat like a living thing. Each breath tasted of rust and decay, a fitting appetizer for what awaited in one of the underground's most reliable information brokers. Nestled between a defunct electronics shop—its windows spider-webbed with cracks that caught the dying light—and a shuttered ramen stand where the ghost of old broth still lingered in the air, Giran's office was the kind of place most people would hurry past, shoulders hunched, eyes averted.

Which was exactly the point.

Shigaraki's boots crunched on broken glass and cigarette butts as he approached the unmarked door, his hands buried so deep in his coat pockets that his knuckles pressed against the fabric. The metal surface before him was a battlefield of rust and violence—dented with what looked like old bullet holes, scratched with the desperate clawing of fingernails, stained with substances he preferred not to identify. He could feel the weight of unseen eyes from darkened windows above, the familiar sensation of being evaluated, measured, catalogued by the neighborhood's unofficial surveillance network.

His gloved hand emerged from his pocket with deliberate slowness, each finger carefully controlled. Three short knocks. Two long. One short. The sound echoed hollowly in the cramped space, swallowed by the urban canyon of crumbling brick and corrugated metal.

Behind the door, mechanical sounds chittered and whirred—a symphony of paranoia made manifest in steel and springs. Multiple locks, deadbolts, chains, and at least two different alarm systems disengaging in sequence. When the door finally swung open, it moved with the weight of armored plating, and Giran's weathered face appeared in the gap like a gargoyle emerging from shadow.

"Well, well," Giran drawled, his voice a gravel road worn smooth by decades of unfiltered cigarettes. The smoke curling from the corner of his mouth moved with the words, creating small grey phantoms in the air between them. "Look what the cat dragged in." His eyes—small, sharp, calculating—swept over Shigaraki with the efficiency of a scanner, cataloguing changes, noting differences. "The prodigal son returns. Tell me, did some time in the cooler do you any good? You look... different."

Different. The word hung between them like a challenge. Shigaraki could feel it—the change in his posture, the controlled stillness where once there had been barely contained violence. Prison had been a crucible, burning away the raw fury and leaving something harder, more focused. More dangerous.

He stepped into the cluttered office, and the familiar assault on his senses hit him like a physical blow. The space was exactly as he remembered it—archaeological layers of accumulated paranoia and greed. Stacks of files reached toward the water-stained ceiling like paper monoliths, their edges yellowed with age and heavy with secrets that could topple governments or end lives with equal ease. Multiple computer monitors displayed scrolling data in green phosphorescent text, their collective glow casting everything in a sickly underwater light. And through it all, the ever-present haze of cigarette smoke that clung to every surface like a second skin, seeping into clothing, hair, the very walls themselves until the boundary between air and ash became meaningless.

"I'm not here for life lessons, old man," Shigaraki replied, settling into the cracked leather chair across from Giran's desk. The seat exhaled decades of accumulated conversations—whispered confessions, screamed threats, the desperate bargaining of the damned. His voice carried a new quality now, something that made Giran's fingers pause fractionally over his lighter. Calmer. More controlled than the volatile snarls the old broker remembered. Like a blade that had been tempered in fire and ice until every molecule aligned in perfect, lethal harmony.

Giran raised an eyebrow as he lowered himself into his own chair, the springs beneath him groaning in protest—a sound that had become the unofficial soundtrack of his declining empire. "Information, eh?" The cigarette between his lips bobbed with each word, ash drifting down to join its fallen comrades in the overflowing tray beside his elbow. "That's my specialty. What kind of information are we talking about?"

The air conditioning unit in the corner wheezed asthmatically, fighting a losing battle against the accumulated heat of electronics and human bodies. Somewhere in the maze of cables snaking across the floor, a connection sparked and hissed, sending ozone into the already toxic atmosphere.

"Someone's been making moves in the black market," Shigaraki said, leaning forward slightly. The leather beneath him creaked, and he could smell the ghosts of previous occupants—fear sweat, desperation, the metallic taste of blood from deals gone wrong. "New players. I want to know if they're stepping into our corner, trying to make things difficult for us."

The cigarette bobbed as Giran chuckled, a sound like gravel tumbling down a hillside during an avalanche. "Kid, that's not how this works. That's not how I do business." His fingers—stained yellow from decades of nicotine worship—tapped ash into the overflowing tray with the precision of ritual. "Client confidentiality is one of my core policies. You should know that by now."

The silence that followed was pregnant with possibility and violence. In the old days, this would have been the moment where Shigaraki's rage ignited, where his Quirk would have turned furniture to dust and Giran to a very nervous, very compliant shell of his former self. The old broker's muscles tensed imperceptibly, preparing for the familiar dance of intimidation and submission.

Instead, Shigaraki reached into his coat with movements so controlled they seemed choreographed. The envelope he withdrew was thick, heavy with promise, the paper crisp with the kind of money that didn't ask questions. He placed it carefully on the desk between them, and the sound it made—that soft whisper of wealth meeting wood—was louder than any threat he might have uttered.

"Come on, Giran. You know we're good for it. Always have been."

Giran's eyes flicked to the envelope for perhaps a tenth of a second—long enough to estimate its contents, weigh its value against his principles, and find both wanting. Instead, he took a long drag from his cigarette, the cherry glowing like a malevolent eye in the dim light. The smoke he exhaled drifted toward the ceiling fan that turned with lazy, irregular rotations, its blades cutting through the haze like the wings of some mechanical vulture.

"Money talks," he said finally, his voice carrying the weight of hard-earned wisdom, "but silence pays better in this business. If you want information, you're going to have to crawl around in the dirt for it yourself. I'm not budging."

To Giran's surprise—and, if he was honest, mild disappointment—Shigaraki didn't explode into his characteristic rage. No fists slamming into desktop, no threats of decay-powered dissolution, no theatrical displays of barely contained violence. Instead, something far more unsettling occurred: a slow smile spread across the young villain's face. Not the manic grin of his past, all teeth and madness, but something more calculating, more patient. Something that spoke of lessons learned in the depths of cells where time moved differently and survival required evolution.

"You didn't deny it outright," Shigaraki observed, his tone conversational, almost friendly. The change was so dramatic it made Giran's cigarette tremble slightly between his lips. "That tells me there might be some kind of upstart trying to make a name for themselves. Someone worth worrying about."

The old broker felt something cold settle in his stomach—the recognition that he was no longer dealing with the same person who had stormed out of here months ago in a cloud of fury and decay. This was someone new. Someone who had learned to read between the lines, to hear the words that weren't spoken, to play the game with rules he was only beginning to understand.

Giran shrugged, his expression carefully neutral, but behind his eyes, gears were turning. "Could be the case. Could be not. Whether you want to know or not—that's gonna be on you, kid." He leaned back in his chair, studying Shigaraki with renewed interest, the way a zoologist might examine a familiar species that had suddenly sprouted new and concerning adaptations. "Prison really did change you, didn't it?"

"Among other things," Shigaraki replied cryptically, and his gaze began to wander around the office with casual interest. But there was nothing casual about the way his eyes catalogued details—the placement of security cameras, the locations of weapons, the subtle tells that would indicate Giran's level of nervousness. "So, are we going to do business today, or are you going to keep playing coy?"

"Depends," Giran said curtly, taking another drag that made the cherry of his cigarette glow like a warning beacon. "You want to buy something or not?"

Shigaraki's smile widened, and his eyes fixed on something specific with the precision of a laser designator. He pointed at Giran's coat pocket with one carefully controlled finger. "That lollipop."

Giran followed his gaze and felt his eyebrows climb toward his receding hairline. Of all the valuable intelligence, weapons, and contraband scattered throughout his office, the kid was fixated on candy. "Seriously? Of all the things in here..." He reached into his pocket with movements that spoke of genuine bewilderment, withdrawing a cherry lollipop still wrapped in crinkled cellophane that caught the light like a tiny stained-glass window.

For a moment that stretched into eternity, as Shigaraki extended his hand, Giran tensed. The memory of the young man's deadly Quirk flashed through his mind in vivid, terrifying detail—everything he touched crumbling to dust, matter itself rebelling against his presence. He'd seen grown men reduced to powder with less warning than a sneeze. The envelope on his desk suddenly seemed very far away, and his chair felt like it was made of tissue paper and wishful thinking.

But instead of the expected decay, instead of the molecular dissolution that should have reduced both candy and hand to component atoms, Shigaraki simply plucked the lollipop from Giran's palm with careful precision. No destruction. No drama. Just a transaction so mundane it was almost insulting.

"Thanks," Shigaraki said, unwrapping the lollipop as he stood to leave. The cellophane crinkled like autumn leaves, and the artificial cherry scent that escaped was a jarring note of innocence in the symphony of corruption that defined Giran's world. "This has been illuminating."

As the door closed behind him with the finality of a tomb sealing, Giran released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. His hands shook slightly as he stubbed out his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray, the motion automatic, comforting in its familiarity. "Kids these days," he muttered to himself, already reaching for another smoke with the desperate need of a man who had just glimpsed something that defied his understanding of how the world worked. "Can't tell if they're getting smarter or just more annoying."

Outside in the alley, Shigaraki popped the lollipop into his mouth, and the artificial cherry flavor exploded across his taste buds like a memory of childhood innocence he'd never actually possessed. The sweetness was cloying, chemical, perfect—a small act of rebellion against the bitter complexity his life had become. As he walked away from Giran's fortress of paranoia, he savored both the candy and the knowledge he'd extracted without payment.

Giran's non-denial had told him everything he needed to know. There was indeed a new player in the game—someone significant enough that even mentioning them made the old broker's cigarette tremble between his fingers.

Patience, he reminded himself, a lesson learned in the depths of Tartarus where time moved like molasses and survival required the kind of self-control he'd never needed on the outside. Good things come to those who wait.

The artificial cherry dissolved slowly on his tongue, and with each passing second, his smile grew a little wider.

The Todoroki family dojo breathed with the weight of generations—polished wooden floors worn smooth by countless hours of practice, their surface reflecting decades of sweat, blood, and determination like a mirror made of memory and wood grain. Traditional sliding doors filtered the afternoon sunlight into gentle geometric patterns that moved across the walls with the stately progress of sundials, while the air itself seemed to hold the accumulated essence of discipline: the sharp bite of weapon oil, the clean sweat of honest exertion, and beneath it all, the faint ghost of incense from the small shrine in the corner where generations of Todorokis had paid their respects to ancestors and aspirations alike.

Shoto Todoroki stood in the center of the spacious room, his breathing steady despite the intensity of the training session that had just concluded. His body told the story of his dual nature in ways that never failed to fascinate and disturb him—wisps of steam rose from his left side where ice crystals were rapidly melting, each droplet catching the light like tiny prisms, while his right side radiated a controlled heat that made the air shimmer and dance in ways that reminded him of summer roads and forge fires. The contrast was so sharp that standing directly in front of him was like straddling two different seasons, two different worlds that somehow coexisted in the space of human flesh.

His movements as he transitioned between fire and ice had been fluid, precise—liquid mercury flowing between states of matter with the kind of control that spoke of thousands of hours of practice, of muscle memory burned so deep it had become cellular programming. It was a stark contrast to the clumsy, unbalanced techniques he'd struggled with just months earlier, when each element had felt like a foreign language he was trying to speak while drunk.

But the improvement was more than technical. There was something fundamentally different about the way he carried himself now, the way he moved through space as if he understood secrets about the nature of temperature and matter that textbooks couldn't teach. The three days with Kagutsuchi at Ground Gamma felt like a fever dream when he tried to remember them clearly—repeated cycles of pushing his limits until complete exhaustion became a physical inevitability, only to be instantly restored and forced to continue. It had been like dying and being reborn over and over, each resurrection bringing with it new understanding, new integration, new ways of seeing the fundamental forces that flowed through his body.

Enji Todoroki stood at the edge of the training space, still imposing in his casual training clothes, his massive frame somehow making even comfortable cotton look like battle armor. His eyes—sharp, analytical, missing nothing—had been tracking every movement for the past hour. Not just watching, but dissecting, cataloguing, measuring against some internal standard that seemed to recalibrate with each passing moment. His expression held a mixture of professional assessment and something that might have been paternal pride, if pride could be weaponized and used as a tool for motivation.

The silence between them stretched like a held breath, filled with the settling sounds of the dojo—wooden joints contracting as temperature fluctuations played across them, the whisper of air moving through the space, the distant sounds of the household continuing its daily rhythm beyond these walls.

"Your control has improved dramatically," Enji said finally, his deep voice carrying across the dojo with the authority of someone accustomed to being heard and obeyed. Each word was measured, weighted, carrying implications that went far beyond simple observation. "The transition between fire and ice—it's become almost instinctive. This level of progress... it's faster than I've seen before."

The compliment hit the air between them like a gauntlet thrown down, loaded with expectation and demand. Shoto could feel the weight of it, the way it tried to wrap around him like chains made of approval and ambition.

He straightened slightly, brushing a strand of sweat-dampened hair from his forehead with movements that were automatic, practiced. His heterochromatic eyes remained focused on the practice dummy he'd been working with, its surface a testament to hours of concentrated effort—alternating frost and scorch marks creating patterns that looked almost artistic, if art could be made from the systematic application of elemental violence.

"I've been training extra hard lately," he replied simply, his tone as controlled as his Quirk, each word carefully modulated to give away nothing of the cosmic forces that had reshaped his understanding of power itself.

It wasn't technically a lie. The three days with Kagutsuchi had been unlike anything that existed in normal human experience—training that transcended the physical and became something closer to spiritual reconstruction. But how could he explain that to his father? How could he describe the sensation of having your limits not just pushed but completely redefined by a being whose very existence made concepts like "improvement" and "progress" seem laughably inadequate?

Enji nodded approvingly, though his sharp gaze continued to study his son with the intensity of a researcher examining a promising but unpredictable experiment. "Your performance has been impeccable. The precision with which you're able to regulate temperature, the speed of your transitions—it's exactly what I've been hoping to see from you."

There was something hungry in the way he said it, something that made the pride feel more like possession than genuine appreciation. Shoto accepted the praise with a quiet nod, though something flickered in his expression—a guardedness that hadn't been there before, a subtle distance that spoke of secrets that could never be shared.

The weight of recent revelations pressed against his consciousness like a physical force. Cosmic powers, ancient beings, the fundamental restructuring of everything he thought he understood about reality—it all made his father's approval feel somehow smaller, more distant. Like receiving praise for finger painting when you'd just learned to sculpt with starlight.

"Tell me," Enji continued, moving closer with the predatory grace that had made him the Number Two Hero, each step calculated to project authority and expectation in equal measure, "how does your fire compare to Midoriya's now?"

The question landed between them like a bomb with a slow-burning fuse. Shoto's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly, the only external sign of the complex emotional reaction churning beneath his carefully maintained surface. The memory of the Sports Festival flashed through his mind with crystalline clarity—Izuku's Flame Form materializing like something out of legend, golden armor wreathed in fire that seemed to come from the birth of stars themselves.

He could still feel it, if he concentrated—the way those supernatural flames had moved with intelligence and purpose, bending his own fire to their will as if his Quirk was nothing more than a suggestion that could be politely ignored. It had been humbling in a way that went beyond simple defeat, a fundamental reordering of his understanding of what power could be.

"We're fairly even," Shoto answered after a moment that stretched just long enough to feel significant, his voice carefully neutral, engineered to give away nothing of the cosmic truth that made such comparisons meaningless.

It was another half-truth, another careful construction designed to maintain the facade of normalcy while protecting secrets that could reshape the world. In raw power, Izuku's Flame Form still outclassed anything Shoto could produce by orders of magnitude that defied measurement. But his improved control, his deeper integration of fire and ice, had at least closed some portion of that gap. Like learning to swim in an ocean where someone else controlled the tides.

Enji's expression darkened, his flames flickering more intensely around his beard like angry spirits responding to their master's mood. The scowl that crossed his features was familiar—the look of a man whose carefully constructed expectations had been challenged by reality's stubborn refusal to conform to his designs.

"Even isn't good enough," he growled, his voice dropping to that dangerous rumble that had cowed villains across Japan and made heroes reconsider their career choices. "You need to surpass him, Shoto. Ever since I witnessed his Flame Form at the Sports Festival, ever since he defeated you with it, I've been using that boy as the benchmark for your potential."

The irony wasn't lost on Shoto—in fact, it hit him with the force of cosmic joke whose punchline was written in the fundamental forces of reality itself. His father, obsessed with creating the perfect hero, had latched onto Izuku as the standard by which all progress should be measured. If only Enji knew the true nature of what he was comparing his son to—not just another student with a fire Quirk, but something that existed outside the normal rules of human limitation, a being whose power would continue to evolve in ways that defied conventional understanding of what was possible.

It was like using the sun as a benchmark for candle brightness and expecting the candle to eventually burn brighter through sheer determination and proper training techniques.

"It's fine," Shoto said, his voice taking on that familiar detached quality that had become his default when dealing with his father's expectations—a emotional armor that had been forged in childhood and tempered by years of practice. "I will surpass Midoriya."

The words came easily, another performance in the elaborate dance he'd been doing with Enji for years. Promises made with no intention of explanation, commitments that sounded real enough to satisfy parental ambition while protecting the speaker from having to engage with the impossibility of what was being demanded.

But beneath the surface, beneath the careful construction of filial duty and competitive spirit, Shoto carried knowledge that made such goals fundamentally meaningless. He'd seen what Izuku was becoming, had witnessed firsthand the cosmic forces at play. The gap between them wasn't just about training or technique or genetic potential—it was about the very nature of their existence, the difference between human limitation and something that transcended such concepts entirely.

Still, he could play the role expected of him. Let his father believe in benchmarks and surpassing rivals and the power of determination to overcome any obstacle. The truth was far more complex, and far more terrifying, than Enji could possibly imagine.

"Good," Enji said, the flames around him settling back to their usual controlled flicker, each tendril moving with the precise choreography of barely contained power. "That's the attitude I want to see. Your potential is limitless, Shoto, but only if you're willing to push beyond what you think is possible."

If only you knew how far beyond 'possible' things have already gone, Shoto thought, but he simply nodded again, maintaining the facade of the dutiful son focused on surpassing his rival through hard work and proper application of superior genetics.

The afternoon light continued its slow dance across the dojo walls, and somewhere in the distance, a clock chimed the hour with mechanical indifference to the cosmic forces reshaping reality one training session at a time.

The morning air was crisp enough to make each breath feel like a small act of rebellion against the coming warmth of day, and Shoto's exhalations formed small puffs of vapor that dissipated quickly in the cool autumn breeze like ghosts of thoughts he couldn't quite articulate. The streets were bustling with their usual morning symphony—the shuffle of early commuters, the mechanical precision of fellow students moving in predictable patterns, the distant hum of traffic mixing with the closer sounds of conversations and footsteps on concrete.

But his mind was elsewhere, turning over his father's words from the previous evening like stones in a tumbler, wearing away at the edges until what remained was either polished truth or meaningless debris.

Surpass Midoriya.

The phrase had been echoing in his thoughts since he'd left the dojo, following him through dinner, through homework, through the restless hours of sleep where dreams of golden flames and impossible expectations chased each other in circles. It repeated itself with the persistence of a mantra, but the more he considered it—really considered it, beyond the automatic responses and practiced promises—the more hollow it seemed.

His father had no idea what he was truly asking. Had no concept of what Shoto had witnessed during that devastating match at the Sports Festival, no understanding of the forces that had been unleashed in what everyone else saw as just another student competition.

The memory was still there, preserved in his mind with the crystalline clarity that trauma sometimes provides. He could recall every detail: the moment when Izuku had activated his Flame Form, the way reality itself seemed to bend around him as golden armor materialized like something out of ancient mythology. But it wasn't just the visual that had burned itself into his memory—it was everything else.

The presence that had filled the arena, making the air itself feel thick and charged with potential. The way those supernatural flames had danced across Izuku's body, moving with an intelligence that went beyond simple Quirk manifestation. They had radiated a heat that transcended mere temperature—it had felt primordial, fundamental, as if Izuku was wielding fire in its purest conceptual form, the Platonic ideal of combustion made manifest in physical reality.

But what had been most humbling wasn't the raw power, impressive as it was. It was the control.

Shoto's steps slowed as the memory played out in perfect detail, his body responding to psychological stimuli as if he were back in that arena, facing down something that shouldn't have been possible. He recalled how effortlessly Izuku had redirected his attacks—flames that Shoto had spent years learning to shape and direct, techniques that represented thousands of hours of practice and refinement, bent to Izuku's will as if they were extensions of his own Quirk.

Every blast of fire he'd thrown had been caught, twisted, and sent back with casual ease that spoke of mastery so complete it looked like play. It was as if Midoriya had been conducting an orchestra and Shoto's flames were just another instrument under his command—not stolen, not overpowered, but conducted with the kind of authority that comes from understanding something at its most fundamental level.

The memory still stung, even months later. After a lifetime of being told he was perfect—a seamless blend of his parents' elements, the ideal fusion of fire and ice, the genetic lottery winner who would surpass All Might himself—he'd encountered someone who could treat his "perfect" flames like mere suggestions.

It had shattered something in his understanding of himself and his place in the world. All those years of training, all that careful development of technique and control, all the pride he'd taken in his precise application of opposing forces—reduced to irrelevance in the span of minutes.

Then he'd tried his ice, desperate to find some advantage, some way to break through Izuku's overwhelming control. The memory of that moment was even worse than the fire's redirection—watching his ice not just melt, but be transformed, the water evaporating instantly as if Izuku's very presence was anathema to his cold side as well.

It had been surreal, humbling in a way that no amount of his father's harsh training had ever managed. For the first time in his life, Shoto had encountered someone whose mastery over the elements made his own abilities seem like a child playing with matches while watching a master blacksmith forge steel.

And that was before he'd learned the truth about what Izuku really was.

The revelation about Agito, about cosmic forces and evolutionary potential that transcended normal human understanding, had recontextualized everything. Kagutsuchi's casual remarks about growth and development, about powers that existed outside the normal rules of Quirk manifestation, echoed in his memory like prophecies he was only beginning to understand.

If Izuku's current abilities were just the beginning, if this was merely the foundation of what he might become, if the gap between them was measured not in training hours or technique refinement but in fundamental differences of existence itself...

Shoto exhaled slowly, watching his breath dissipate in the morning air like his father's expectations dissolving into the impossibility of cosmic truth. There was something almost liberating about the scale of it all—when you realized that the game itself was rigged at levels beyond human comprehension, the pressure to win according to conventional rules began to lose its grip on your psyche.

His father's expectations, his demands for surpassing rivals and achieving perfection, suddenly felt so much smaller when viewed against the cosmic scale of what was really happening. Like being asked to outrun light itself and taking the challenge seriously because you didn't understand the fundamental physics involved.

The irony wasn't lost on him that his father's obsession might be what finally freed him from those same expectations. As U.A.'s imposing gates came into view—those familiar pillars of academic ambition and heroic aspiration—Shoto made a mental note to call the hospital later.

His mother would appreciate knowing that he was finally finding his own path, independent of Enji's grand designs and impossible demands. She would understand, in the way that only someone who had survived their own collision with Todoroki expectations could understand, that sometimes the greatest victory was simply walking away from a game you were never meant to win.

The morning sun climbed higher, and with each step toward school, Shoto felt something like peace settling over him. Not the peace of surrender, but the peace of understanding—the quiet satisfaction that comes from finally seeing the real shape of the world, even when that shape is stranger and more wonderful than anything you could have imagined.

The industrial district on the outskirts of Musutafu sprawled like a cancer across the landscape—a maze of aging warehouses and forgotten factories where the city's economic ambitions had come to die slow, rusting deaths. The air here didn't just smell of industry; it tasted of it, coating the back of the throat with metallic residue and chemical tang that no amount of swallowing could clear. Rust mixed with oil mixed with something far more insidious—the acrid scent of human desperation that seemed to rise from the cracked pavement like heat shimmer from summer asphalt.

Toshinori Yagi crouched on a fire escape that swayed slightly under his muscular frame, the metal protesting with small creaks and groans that spoke of years spent fighting a losing battle against corrosion and neglect. From his perch overlooking the target building, he could see the systematic decay that had claimed this part of the city—windows boarded up with plywood that had itself begun to rot, walls covered in graffiti that ranged from territorial markings to desperate pleas for help that no one would ever read.

The anonymous tip had been specific in the way that desperation made people specific: Warehouse 47, third shift, Quirkless laborers held against their will in conditions that would make prison seem luxurious by comparison. The whistleblower's voice had trembled over the phone with the particular frequency of someone who had seen too much and could no longer carry the weight of that knowledge alone. Three days had passed since that call, and the words had haunted Toshinori's dreams like accusatory ghosts.

"Visual confirmation on at least six guards patrolling the perimeter," Hawks' voice crackled through the earpiece, his keen eyes having spotted details from his aerial reconnaissance that ground-level observation would have missed entirely. "Quirk signatures suggest low-level villains—nothing we can't handle, but they're armed and definitely not afraid to use lethal force. I'm seeing automatic weapons, some kind of sonic cannon, and what looks like restraint equipment designed for Quirk suppression."

Toshinori's jaw tightened until his teeth ached, every muscle in his body coiling with barely contained fury. The restoration Kagutsuchi had performed on him meant he no longer faced the crushing time limit that had once defined his heroic career, but even with his renewed strength coursing through his veins like liquid lightning, the thought of innocent people suffering while he planned made his blood boil with the heat of a thousand suns.

Still, rushing in blindly would only endanger the very people he was trying to save. The old All Might might have burst through the walls like a force of nature, trusting in overwhelming power to solve every problem. But that All Might had failed these people by not being here sooner, by allowing this horror to exist in the shadows of his city.

"Understood. On my mark," he replied, his voice low and controlled despite the rage simmering beneath the surface like magma waiting for the earth to crack.

The attack came swift and decisive, choreographed by two heroes who had learned to trust each other's instincts completely. Toshinori burst through the main entrance like a natural disaster given human form—the reinforced steel door, designed to withstand everything from battering rams to small explosives, crumpled like paper under his assault. The sound was tremendous, a metallic scream that echoed through the warehouse complex and sent flocks of roosting pigeons exploding into the night sky.

The first guard, a man whose Quirk allowed him to shoot crystalline spikes from his palms with the velocity of rifle rounds, barely had time to register the hero's presence before a precisely controlled punch sent him crashing into a stack of shipping containers. The impact left a man-shaped dent in steel plates designed to survive ocean storms, and the guard's unconscious form slumped to the ground like a discarded puppet.

Hawks swept in from above through a skylight he'd carefully prepared, glass raining down like lethal snow as his crimson feathers moved with deadly precision. Each feather was a projectile guided by years of training and instinct—not just thrown, but directed with the kind of control that made his Quirk look like telekinesis given form. A villain with the ability to generate toxic gas clouds found himself bound and unconscious before he could fully activate his Quirk, Hawks' feathers having struck pressure points with surgical accuracy that spoke of anatomical knowledge most doctors would envy.

Another guard, whose rubber-like skin should have made him resistant to physical attacks, discovered that All Might's punches could overcome any defensive Quirk through sheer, overwhelming force applied with mathematical precision. The blow was calculated to incapacitate without killing, but the crater it left in the concrete floor served as a reminder that such restraint was a choice, not a limitation.

The battle was over in minutes—a symphony of violence conducted with the efficiency of professional heroes working in perfect coordination. Six guards lay unconscious, their various Quirks having proven utterly inadequate against two of Japan's most skilled heroes. Spike projection, toxic gas, rubber skin, magnetic field manipulation, acid secretion, and sonic scream—powers that might have made them legends in smaller ponds, reduced to footnotes in a rescue operation.

But it was what they found deeper in the warehouse that truly tested their resolve, that made the easy violence of the fight seem like a warm-up for a much more devastating blow.

The stench hit them first, a physical assault that made both heroes instinctively step back. It wasn't just unwashed bodies or poor sanitation—it was the smell of human dignity being systematically stripped away, layer by layer, until what remained was something that registered more as livestock than people. Unwashed flesh mixed with human waste mixed with the sickly-sweet smell of untreated infections, creating an atmosphere so toxic it seemed to cling to their clothes and skin like oil.

Then came the sounds: weak coughs that spoke of respiratory systems damaged by poor air quality and constant stress, labored breathing that suggested malnutrition severe enough to affect basic bodily functions, and beneath it all, the soft whimpers of people who had long since given up hope of rescue. Not crying—that required energy they no longer possessed—but the involuntary sounds that escaped when even the will to remain silent had been broken.

The cell door was a mockery of security, a heavy steel barrier more suited to containing dangerous criminals than protecting workers. Its surface was scarred with the desperate scratches of fingernails worn down to the quick, stained with substances that spoke of human suffering reduced to its most basic biological functions. Toshinori didn't bother looking for keys—the rage building in his chest had moved beyond such niceties as proper procedure. His hands found purchase on the reinforced frame, fingers that could crush diamonds closing around steel that had been designed to last centuries.

With a sound like thunder being born in the depths of the earth, he tore the entire door from its hinges. The metal shrieked as molecular bonds snapped under forces they were never meant to withstand, and the barrier that had contained so much suffering fell to the concrete floor with a crash that seemed to shake the entire building.

What lay beyond defied every principle of human dignity he had sworn to protect.

Dozens of people huddled in the dim, fetid space—men, women, and... children. His heart clenched as he saw small forms clinging desperately to adults who might have been parents, siblings, or simply other prisoners who had taken on the role of protectors in a world where protection had become the rarest commodity. Their clothes were little more than rags, fabric so stained and worn it was impossible to tell what colors they might once have been. Many showed signs of malnutrition that went beyond simple hunger—faces gaunt not just from lack of food but from the systematic denial of hope itself, eyes sunken deep into skulls that seemed too large for the flesh that barely covered them.

Others bore the unmistakable marks of physical abuse: bruises in various stages of healing that painted a timeline of violence across human skin, poorly treated wounds that had been left to fester because medical care was another luxury these people had been denied, and the haunted look of souls who had been broken in ways that went far beyond the physical.

But the worst part—the detail that would haunt Toshinori's dreams for months to come—was the silence. These people had been reduced to a state where even the appearance of heroes, symbols of hope and salvation that should have sparked joy or relief or at least recognition, couldn't elicit so much as a flicker of response in most of their eyes.

They had been so thoroughly brutalized, so completely stripped of their humanity, that rescue itself had become a concept beyond their ability to process.

"Jesus Christ," Hawks breathed, his usual composed demeanor cracking like ice under spring sun as he took in the scene. His voice carried a tremor that spoke of a man confronting evil in its purest form—not the theatrical villainy of costumed criminals or the abstract threats of mass destruction, but the intimate horror of human cruelty applied with systematic precision. His fingers moved to his radio with practiced efficiency, muscle memory taking over when conscious thought became too overwhelming. "Control, this is Hawks. We need immediate medical response at our location. Multiple victims, children included. Conditions are... critical."

The word 'critical' felt inadequate, like describing a hurricane as 'breezy' or a volcanic eruption as 'warm.' This was beyond critical—this was a humanitarian disaster that had been allowed to fester in the heart of a city that prided itself on its heroes and their ability to protect the innocent.

While Hawks coordinated the rescue response, his voice becoming steadier as training and professionalism provided an emotional shield against the horror before them, Toshinori approached the nearest cluster of prisoners. His massive frame, usually a source of comfort and inspiration to those in need, seemed almost grotesque in this context—an obscene reminder of the power and privilege that had failed so completely to protect these people.

The contrast was devastating: his restored body, rippling with strength that could move mountains, standing before human beings who had been reduced to breathing skeletons by systematic cruelty.

He knelt carefully beside an elderly man who sat propped against the concrete wall, his weathered hands resting limply in his lap like fallen leaves. The man's clothes hung loose on his emaciated frame, fabric that had once been sized for a person of normal weight now draping across bones that stood out in sharp relief. A persistent cough shook his shoulders at regular intervals, each spasm seeming to use up precious energy he couldn't afford to lose.

"Sir," Toshinori said softly, his voice stripped of its usual booming confidence, reduced to something barely above a whisper because anything louder felt like violence in this space of broken spirits. "You're safe now. We're here to help. Are you hurt? Can you tell me your name?"

The man slowly raised his head with movements that spoke of joints that no longer worked properly, of a body that had been pushed far beyond its limits and was now operating on nothing but stubborn biological momentum. When his eyes finally met Toshinori's, the hero felt something shatter in his chest—not metaphorically, but with almost physical force, as if his ribs had cracked under the weight of what he was seeing.

The eyes that met his were empty. Not just tired or afraid or traumatized—those were states that still contained some spark of humanity, some recognition that the person behind them continued to exist as more than just biological processes. These eyes were hollow, as if the person behind them had been systematically erased over months or years of dehumanization so complete it had reached the level of spiritual dissolution.

There was no relief at seeing All Might, no spark of recognition that the Symbol of Peace himself had come to their rescue, no hope flickering to life in the presence of someone who had dedicated his life to protecting the innocent. Just a vast, crushing emptiness that spoke of a soul that had been broken beyond any possibility of repair.

The man's lips moved slightly, making the barest suggestion of sound, but nothing emerged except the ghost of breath across vocal cords that might have forgotten how to form words. He simply stared at Toshinori with that terrible, vacant gaze—looking through him rather than at him, as if the concept of 'rescue' or 'hope' or 'help' had been surgically removed from his understanding of reality.

After a moment that felt like hours, the man slowly lowered his head again, the effort of making eye contact having exhausted what little strength he had left. The gesture was dismissive not from rudeness but from the complete absence of any belief that this moment could mean anything different from all the moments that had come before.

Rage bloomed in Toshinori's chest like a flower made of molten steel—not the clean, righteous anger that had always fueled his heroic deeds, but something darker and more personal. This wasn't just villainy; this was systematic cruelty designed to strip away everything that made these people human, to reduce them to biological functions that could be exploited without the inconvenience of conscience.

He remembered a news report he'd dismissed years ago—a brief mention of missing persons in this very district that had been quickly buried beneath more flashy villain fights and colorful heroic victories. At the time, he'd been focused on larger threats, more visible challenges, the kind of dramatic confrontations that made for good television and better press coverage.

But looking into these empty eyes now, Toshinori realized he had been wrong. This quiet horror, this systematic destruction of human dignity, was more evil than any costumed villain with delusions of grandeur. And he had been too late, too slow, too focused on the grand stage while this intimate nightmare played out in the shadows of his city.

The sound of approaching sirens filled the air, promising medical attention, legal justice, and eventual rehabilitation for the survivors. But as Toshinori looked into that empty, broken gaze, he wondered if some wounds ran too deep for even the best intentions to heal.

Some things, once broken, could never be made whole again.

The familiar comfort of Nighteye Agency felt hollow and artificial as Toshinori sat hunched on the leather couch in Mirai's office, his civilian form a deliberate rejection of the symbol of strength he'd projected just hours earlier. The expensive leather beneath him, the carefully arranged furniture, the subtle displays of wealth and success—all of it felt like a stage set for a play about people who had never encountered real suffering.

His broad shoulders were curved inward in a posture that spoke of weight that had nothing to do with physical burden, hands pressed against his temples as if he could physically contain the images that kept replaying in his mind with photographic clarity. Empty eyes, emaciated children, the stench of human suffering that seemed to cling to his clothes despite changing them twice and scrubbing his skin until it was raw.

Mirai approached quietly, his footsteps muffled by carpet that probably cost more than some people made in a year—a thought that would never have occurred to either of them before tonight, but now felt obscenely relevant. He set a steaming cup of coffee on the glass table with practiced precision, the ceramic making a soft clink that sounded unnaturally loud in the oppressive silence.

Even the low murmur of the television in the corner felt intrusive, its carefully modulated tones delivering the evening's report with the same professional detachment used for weather updates or stock market fluctuations.

"—rescue operation concluded successfully this evening, with thirty-seven individuals recovered from what authorities are calling a human trafficking operation targeting Quirkless citizens. The victims have been transported to local medical facilities for treatment and evaluation. Hero Commission officials stress that this operation represents their continued commitment to protecting all citizens, regardless of Quirk status—"

Toshinori didn't need to look at the screen to know how this would be received by the general public. The reporter's voice carried that particular tone of importance-without-urgency that meant the story would be processed, filed away, and forgotten with remarkable efficiency. Tomorrow, it would be buried on page three of newspapers that most people wouldn't read anyway, displaced by more sensational hero work—flashy villain fights with property damage, ranking updates, celebrity hero scandals, anything that made for better ratings than systematic human suffering.

The bitter truth was that most people would simply turn the page, literally and figuratively. The Quirkless weren't exotic enough to warrant sustained attention, weren't powerful enough to be seen as significant threats or compelling victims. They were society's background noise, the forgotten twenty percent that reminded everyone else of their good fortune in winning the genetic lottery.

Toshinori knew there were exceptions, of course. His students would be outraged when they learned about this—he could already picture their faces, the righteous anger that would burn in their eyes like small suns. Young Midoriya in particular would understand this injustice in a way that cut to the bone, having lived his entire childhood as one of society's invisible people.

A few good heroes he knew personally would share his disgust, would lose sleep over the implications and demand changes in policy and procedure. But they were drops in an ocean of indifference, and that realization sat in his stomach like lead, heavy and toxic and impossible to digest.

Mirai settled into his desk chair, his sharp eyes studying Toshinori's posture with the analytical precision that had made him such an effective sidekick. The silence stretched between them, filled with the weight of things that couldn't be unseen or unfelt.

"You did good work tonight," he said finally, though both men could hear how empty the words sounded in the heavy air between them, how inadequate language became when faced with the systematic destruction of human dignity.

Toshinori's hands dropped from his temples, falling to rest on his knees with the weight of gravitational inevitability. He stared down at them—hands that Kagutsuchi had restored to their former strength, fingers that could crush steel or cradle a frightened child with equal ease. Yet for all their power, their reach felt impossibly limited when measured against the scope of suffering that existed in the shadows of his city.

"Any more tips come in while I was out?" he asked, his voice rougher than usual, scraped raw by emotions that had no adequate outlet.

"Toshinori." Mirai's tone carried a note of gentle warning, the voice of someone who had watched his friend push beyond human limits before and recognized the warning signs. "You just finished a major operation. You need—"

"I need to do more." The words came out sharper than intended as Toshinori pushed himself up from the couch, his restored frame moving with the restless energy of a caged animal that had just remembered what it was built for. "There are more warehouses out there, Mirai. More people suffering while we sit here drinking coffee and pretending we've made a difference."

He began pacing, his movements agitated, driven by a fire that hadn't burned this bright in years—not since his early days as a hero, when every injustice had felt personal and every victory had felt like it mattered. "Back when I was at my prime, I used to patrol for hours. Dawn to dusk, stopping every crime I could find, helping anyone who needed it. No villain too small, no problem too insignificant."

His hands clenched into fists at his sides, knuckles whitening with the force of his grip as memories of those early days crashed over him like waves. "Maybe if I'd kept doing that instead of focusing on the big threats, instead of playing politics and publicity, instead of becoming a symbol instead of staying a hero..."

"You would have burned out completely," Mirai interrupted, his voice firm but not unkind, carrying the authority of someone who had watched the Symbol of Peace's rise and fall from the closest possible vantage point. "You were already pushing yourself beyond human limits before—"

"But I'm not limited anymore," Toshinori said, turning to face his former sidekick with eyes that burned with renewed purpose. "Kagutsuchi gave me back my strength. Not One For All—that belongs to young Togata now, as it should be. But I have my health, my endurance, my ability to act without the crushing weight of that time limit."

The passion in his voice was unmistakable, a return of the idealistic fire that had driven him to become a hero in the first place—not for glory or recognition or the construction of symbols, but for the simple, fundamental belief that those with power had an obligation to protect those without it.

"I can go back to the way things were," he continued, his voice gaining strength with each word, "when I could make a real difference on the street level, when I could be there for the people who fall through the cracks of our grand heroic society."

But beneath the passion, beneath the righteous determination, Mirai could detect the deeper currents that drove this sudden intensity. Guilt over those empty eyes and broken spirits, frustration with a system that had failed so completely, and a desperate need to prove that his restored abilities could mean something in the face of such systematic cruelty.

Mirai studied him for a long moment, weighing the risks of enabling this crusade against the obvious need burning in his old friend's eyes—the need to feel useful again, to matter in ways that went beyond symbolic presence and public relations.

Finally, he sighed, reaching for a tablet on his desk with movements that spoke of resignation and concern in equal measure. "There have been three more tips since this morning," he admitted, his voice carefully neutral. "Two possible trafficking operations, one suspected Quirk enhancement lab operating out of an abandoned pharmaceutical facility."

Toshinori's entire posture straightened, purpose flowing back into his frame like water into a drought-stricken riverbed. The change was immediate and dramatic—shoulders squaring, spine straightening, the weight of despair replaced by the familiar burden of responsibility willingly accepted.

"But," Mirai continued, holding up a warning finger before his friend could speak, "you're not the same man you were at your prime, even with your strength restored. You're older, hopefully wiser, and definitely more aware of how the world really works."

He fixed Toshinori with a stare that carried decades of partnership and mutual respect. "No more of that reckless charging into danger without backup or proper intelligence. No more assuming that overwhelming force can solve every problem. No more playing the Symbol of Peace when what's needed is just good, honest hero work."

"I promise," Toshinori said, and there was something different in his voice now—not the brash confidence of his younger years, not the carefully constructed assurance of the Symbol of Peace, but something more measured and perhaps more honest. "I'll be careful. I'll work with local heroes, coordinate with agencies, follow proper procedure."

He paused, his gaze distant as he processed the weight of what he was committing to. "But I can't just sit here knowing there are people out there who need help. Not after tonight. Not after seeing what we found in that warehouse."

Mirai nodded slowly, recognizing that his old friend needed this—needed to believe that his restored strength could make a difference, that the empty eyes of broken people could find hope again through direct action rather than symbolic presence.

"Then let's get to work," he said simply, sliding the tablet across the desk with movements that felt ceremonial, like the passing of a torch or the signing of a treaty. "But we do this smart. No more Symbol of Peace grandstanding—just good, honest hero work for people who need heroes, not symbols."

Toshinori picked up the tablet, his restored hands steady as he scrolled through the intelligence reports, each case file representing lives that hung in the balance of his choices. As he read, absorbing details about missing persons and suspected criminal operations, Kagutsuchi's words from their brutal encounter echoed in his mind—that cutting assessment delivered with casual cruelty while the High Lord had dismantled him like a child's toy.

"The Symbol of Peace isn't heroism—it's a character you created for the public to consume. A palatable pill for the masses to swallow while real suffering continues in the shadows you refuse to see."

At the time, those words had felt like salt in open wounds, a cosmic being's dismissive judgment of everything he'd tried to build, everything he'd sacrificed his body and soul to create. But sitting here now, with the memory of empty eyes and broken spirits fresh in his mind, Toshinori found a different truth in that harsh critique.

Kagutsuchi hadn't been entirely wrong. Somewhere along the way, the Symbol of Peace had become more important than the people it was supposed to protect. Press conferences had replaced patrol routes, photo opportunities had taken precedence over investigating tips about missing persons, and the grand gesture had overshadowed the simple act of helping those who needed it most.

The symbol had become real while the man behind it had faded into irrelevance.

But this wasn't about proving the High Lord wrong—such cosmic beings probably had better things to do than keep track of his personal growth. This was about remembering who he'd been before the symbol became more real than the man, before the costume and catchphrases and carefully managed public image had replaced the simple desire to help people.

Before the cameras and the crowds, there had been a young Toshinori Yagi who would spend hours walking dangerous neighborhoods not because the press was watching, but because someone needed to care about the forgotten corners of society. Someone needed to be there for the people who fell through the cracks of a system that was supposed to protect everyone but somehow never quite managed it.

For the first time since entering that warehouse, something like peace settled over his features. He couldn't undo the years of systematic neglect, couldn't erase the empty stares of the broken, couldn't resurrect the people who had died while he played politics and managed his public image. But he could ensure that fewer people would have to endure what he'd witnessed tonight.

Not as the Symbol of Peace—that grand performance could rest for a while, gathering dust in whatever psychological storage space symbols went when they were no longer needed. But as something simpler and perhaps more honest: just a hero. Just a man with the strength to help and the will to act on that strength.

It wasn't much, perhaps, when measured against the cosmic forces that shaped reality and the vast machinery of social indifference that ground up the vulnerable with mechanical precision. But it was a start. And sometimes, starts were all you needed to change everything.

The Midoriya apartment existed in that peculiar state of domestic twilight that settled over single-parent households after the day's obligations had been met and the evening's entertainment had yet to begin. It was quiet except for the steady drone of the television, its blue glow casting shifting shadows across the modest living room like the visual equivalent of white noise. The furniture was comfortable but worn, each piece chosen for function rather than fashion, bearing the subtle marks of a life lived carefully within modest means.

Izuku sat on the edge of the couch, his posture rigid with tension that seemed to radiate from his core outward, emerald eyes fixed on the screen with an intensity that made the air around him feel charged with barely contained emotion. His mother had gone to bed hours ago, leaving him alone with his thoughts and the late-night news cycle that ground through human suffering with mechanical efficiency.

The anchor's face filled the screen—professionally attractive, carefully neutral, trained to deliver even the most horrific news with the same measured tone used for sports scores and weather forecasts.

"—the rescued individuals are receiving medical treatment at several facilities across the city. Hero Commission officials stress that this operation represents their continued commitment to protecting all citizens, regardless of Quirk status. In other news..."

The words were sanitized, processed through layers of editorial oversight and legal review until what remained bore only the faintest resemblance to the reality of what had occurred. There was no mention of the conditions those people had endured, no discussion of how they'd been systematically dehumanized, no acknowledgment that this represented anything more than another successful hero operation.

Just statistics and reassurances that the system was working as intended, numbers that could be filed away and forgotten as soon as the next story began.

Izuku's face set in grim lines, disgust twisting his features as he watched the brief segment wind down with the mechanical inevitability of a factory assembly line. Already, the horror was being replaced by sports highlights and weather forecasts, pushed aside by content that was easier to digest, more palatable to audiences who preferred their evening entertainment without the bitter aftertaste of institutional failure.

By tomorrow morning, this would be buried beneath more sensational stories—villain attacks with impressive property damage, hero ranking updates, celebrity scandals, anything that generated more clicks and views than the suffering of society's most invisible population.

He looked down at his hands, these ordinary-looking appendages that rested in his lap with deceptive calm. To anyone else, they were just the hands of a teenage boy—slightly calloused from training, bearing the small scars that came from a childhood spent reaching for things that always seemed just out of grasp. But he knew what they were capable of, knew the cosmic force that flowed through his veins like liquid starlight.

These hands could transform into instruments of power that defied measurement, could channel forces that existed outside the normal rules of physics and biology. With them, he could reshape reality itself, bend the fundamental forces of the universe to his will, stand against beings whose very existence transcended human understanding.

The memory of his Quirkless years felt both distant and immediate—a paradox of personal history that sat in his chest like a weight that could never be fully lifted. Every sneer from classmates who had seen his lack of power as a character flaw, every pitying look from adults who couldn't quite hide their disappointment, every door that had been subtly but firmly closed in his face because he lacked the genetic lottery ticket that defined social value in their society.

He remembered the isolation, the way conversations would shift when he approached, the careful politeness that was somehow worse than outright hostility because it acknowledged his existence while simultaneously dismissing his worth. The Quirkless were society's cautionary tale, living reminders of what everyone else had been lucky enough to avoid.

His mind drifted back to those early days of awakening, when Kagutsuchi had put him through trials that had pushed him beyond every conceivable limit of human endurance. The pain had been indescribable—not just physical, though his body had been broken and rebuilt more times than he could count—but psychological, spiritual, the kind of suffering that reached into his soul and questioned every assumption he'd ever made about himself and his place in the world.

The fear had been worse than the pain. Fear of failure, fear of inadequacy, fear that even with cosmic power flowing through him, he would still somehow be found wanting. The crushing despair that came with each setback, each moment when it seemed like the forces trying to transform him were too vast, too alien, too far beyond human comprehension for him to ever truly master.

But through blood and sweat and an almost supernatural amount of stubborn determination—the same stubbornness that had carried him through years of being powerless in a world that worshipped power—he had made that cosmic force his own. Not conquered it, because such forces couldn't be conquered, but integrated it, learned to work with it, found ways to channel universe-shaping power through a frame that had once been deemed inadequate by middle school bullies.

Yet in gaining that power, in transcending the limitations that had defined his childhood, had he lost something essential? Had the golden armor and supernatural abilities somehow severed his connection to the powerless boy he'd once been?

The question haunted him as he watched the news cycle move on to more palatable content. It would be so easy to get caught up in the cosmic significance of his role, to focus on the grand battles against Lords and universe-threatening conflicts while ordinary people suffered in warehouses and back alleys. How simple it would be to tell himself that his power was meant for bigger things, more important fights, conflicts that operated on scales beyond individual human suffering.

His hands clenched into fists, knuckles whitening with the force of his grip as the phantom stench of rust and despair filled his senses—not a memory of something he'd experienced directly, but an echo of empathy so deep it felt like personal recollection.

"I won't forget," he whispered to the empty room, his voice carrying the weight of a sacred vow, each word carefully articulated despite the emotion that threatened to choke them off. "I won't let myself forget what it was like."

The guilt was there, gnawing at the edges of his consciousness like a persistent infection. How easy it would be to lose sight of individual suffering when you carried responsibility for cosmic balance, to dismiss human problems as too small to matter when you could feel the weight of universal forces pressing against your awareness.

But those people on the news—the brief glimpses of gaunt faces and empty eyes that the cameras had captured before cutting away to more comfortable subjects—they reminded him of a fundamental truth he couldn't afford to lose. The Agito power wasn't really a Quirk, couldn't be classified or regulated like the abilities that defined his society's hierarchy. But that didn't change the fact that he had power when others didn't, that he could act when others couldn't.

"The truly vulnerable," he murmured, his voice growing stronger with conviction, each word building on the previous one like stones in a foundation that would support whatever came next. "Those the system left behind. Those everyone else forgot about or decided weren't worth saving."

It might be an empty promise—he was still just a student, still learning to control abilities that defied comprehension, still struggling with cosmic forces that treated human concerns as background noise to their larger movements. The gap between his current understanding and the full scope of his potential was vast enough to contain galaxies.

But empty or not, it was his promise to make. His power to use. His responsibility to bear.

The news had moved on to tomorrow's weather forecast, but Izuku's mind was still processing the brief footage he'd glimpsed—All Might and Hawks emerging from that warehouse, their expressions grim with the weight of what they'd witnessed. He knew that look, had seen it in mirrors during his darkest moments when the full scope of society's indifference had threatened to crush what little hope he'd managed to maintain.

His classmates at U.A. would understand, at least partially. They'd be outraged by the injustice, motivated by their heroic ideals to demand change and action. But for most of the world, this would be just another story that filled a news cycle before disappearing into the vast ocean of things that happened to other people.

The Quirkless twenty percent would remember, though. In shelters and soup kitchens, in the margins where society's forgotten people gathered to share what little they had, they would remember that for once—just once—their suffering had been deemed worthy of rescue by symbols of hope and strength.

And maybe, if he worked hard enough, if he stayed true to the powerless boy he'd once been, if he could learn to bridge the gap between cosmic responsibility and human compassion, Izuku could ensure that such remembrance wouldn't be limited to the margins.

Maybe the power flowing through his veins could be more than just a tool for fighting cosmic threats. Maybe it could be a bridge between worlds—the world of the powerful and the world of the forgotten, the realm of grand gestures and the reality of individual suffering.

The television droned on, but Izuku had stopped listening. His hands remained clenched in his lap, and behind his closed eyes, golden light flickered with quiet determination—not the blazing intensity of combat, but the steady glow of purpose that burned without consuming.

He would not forget. He would not abandon his roots. He would not let cosmic power divorce him from human compassion.

And when the time came—when he had grown enough, learned enough, become enough—he would be ready to fight for more than just universal balance. He would fight for the forgotten, the abandoned, the powerless.

Just as someone had once fought for him.

The Yaoyorozu estate loomed before Momo as her family's private car glided through the ornate gates with the whisper-quiet luxury that only unlimited money could buy. The classical architecture rose from manicured grounds like something transplanted from a more elegant age—all marble columns and sweeping staircases, testament to generations of accumulated wealth and the kind of influence that shaped nations from behind closed doors.

The gardens were pristine as always, every hedge trimmed to geometric perfection with the precision of topiary art, every flower bed arranged with the meticulous care that money could buy when it hired the finest landscape architects in the world. Under normal circumstances, the sight of her family home would have been a source of comfort after the emotional turmoil of recent revelations—a return to the familiar rhythms of privilege and expectation.

Today, it felt like approaching a potential battlefield where the rules of engagement had been written in languages she was only beginning to understand.

The car had barely whispered to a stop before Momo was stepping out, her school bag clutched tightly in one hand like a shield against uncertainties she couldn't name. The marble steps beneath her feet had been polished to mirror brightness, each one reflecting her image back at her in fragments that seemed oddly appropriate—as if she were seeing herself broken into pieces that didn't quite fit together anymore.

The household staff greeted her with their usual respectful bows, movements choreographed by years of practice and enforced by generous salaries that bought both competence and discretion. But she barely registered their presence, her mind still reeling from everything she'd learned about Lords and Agito and cosmic forces that apparently conducted their business in the shadows of everyday life.

"Momo." Her father's voice carried across the grand foyer as she slipped off her shoes, his tone holding that particular note of importance that meant business was being conducted—the kind of business that moved markets and reshaped political landscapes with casual conversations over expensive wine.

She looked up to find him approaching, his expensive suit immaculate despite the late hour, fabric that probably cost more than most people's cars tailored to perfection by craftsmen whose names were whispered in the highest circles of fashion. His expression was pleasant but carried an undercurrent she couldn't quite identify—anticipation, perhaps, or carefully controlled excitement that spoke of opportunities recognized and seized.

"Mr. and Mrs. Morgenstern have come for a visit," he continued, his voice warm with what seemed like genuine affection—the tone reserved for valuable allies whose friendship brought both personal satisfaction and professional advantage. "They were asking after you specifically. It's been, what, two years since their last visit?"

The words hit Momo like a physical blow delivered by a master who knew exactly where to strike for maximum impact. Her carefully maintained composure wavered as the name registered fully: Morgenstern. The Swiss couple who had dined at their table with the casual elegance of people accustomed to moving in the highest circles, who had discussed international business ventures with the same refined ease others might use to comment on the weather.

The woman whose voice she had recognized from that impossible conversation between cosmic entities, discussing matters that transcended human understanding while maintaining the perfect veneer of sophisticated European charm.

Her legs felt suddenly unsteady, as if the marble floor beneath her feet had become as insubstantial as the assumptions about reality that had been crumbling around her for weeks. But she forced herself to nod politely, drawing on years of social conditioning that had trained her to maintain grace under pressure—even when that pressure came from dining with fallen angels.

"Of course, Father. I'd be happy to greet them."

Two years ago, they had seemed like any other high-powered international businesspeople who moved through her parents' world with practiced ease. Cultured, sophisticated, possessing that particular brand of European refinement that impressed her parents' social circle and opened doors that remained closed to lesser mortals. Mrs. Morgenstern had complimented her academic achievements with genuine interest, had asked thoughtful questions about her goals and aspirations with the kind of attention that made teenage hearts soar.

Mr. Morgenstern had been quieter but equally charming, with eyes that seemed to hold depths of knowledge and experience that spoke of a life lived at the intersection of power and privilege.

She had thought them interesting but ultimately ordinary—just another wealthy couple in her parents' extensive network of business associates, people who moved money and influence around the globe like pieces on a chessboard she was only beginning to understand.

Now, knowing what she knew, the memory took on an entirely different character. How many cosmic entities regularly attended dinner parties? How many fallen angels discussed quarterly earnings over fine wine and carefully prepared cuisine? How many beings whose very existence defied conventional understanding sat at her family's table and complimented the chef's choice of seasonings?

"They mentioned they were in the area on business," her father continued as they walked toward the sitting room, his voice carrying that pleased tone he always used when discussing successful partnerships—the satisfaction of a man whose investments continued to pay dividends in ways both expected and surprising. "Something about expanding their operations in Japan. They've always been such valuable allies to our family's interests."

Allies. The word felt loaded with implications Momo didn't want to examine too closely, pregnant with possibilities that made her skin crawl with anxiety she couldn't quite name. What kind of business dealings did her family have with beings whose very existence redefined concepts like 'business' and 'partnership'? What had her parents agreed to, knowingly or unknowingly, in their pursuit of ever-greater corporate success?

What contracts had been signed, what deals had been struck, what prices had been negotiated in currencies that had nothing to do with money?

As they approached the ornate doors of the sitting room, Momo could hear voices from within—her mother's cultured laugh that spoke of finishing schools and careful breeding, a man's low chuckle that somehow managed to sound both charming and predatory, and beneath it all, that precise, almost musical feminine voice that had haunted her thoughts since the revelation in their classroom.

Her father's hand moved toward the door handle, and Momo felt her heart rate spike as if her body was preparing for physical combat. Every instinct screamed at her to run, to make some excuse, to avoid whatever confrontation awaited beyond those doors. The fight-or-flight response kicked in with primitive intensity, flooding her system with adrenaline that made her fingertips tingle and her vision sharpen to hypernatural clarity.

But she was a Yaoyorozu, raised from birth to face any social situation with grace and composure that would have made diplomats weep with envy. Generations of breeding and training had prepared her for exactly this kind of moment—even if that preparation had never anticipated the possibility of having tea with legendary cosmic entities who had apparently been family friends for years.

She straightened her shoulders, forced her breathing to steady through sheer willpower, and prepared to greet the beings she now knew as Lucifer and Selaphiel with all the polite charm her upbringing had instilled in her.

After all, what was the worst that could happen?

The sitting room was bathed in the soft glow of crystal chandeliers, their light catching and refracting through countless faceted surfaces to create patterns that danced across impeccably clean walls like imprisoned rainbows. The afternoon sun streamed through tall windows, adding natural warmth to the artificial illumination and creating the kind of atmosphere that interior designers spent lifetimes trying to achieve.

Her mother sat on a velvet sofa that probably cost more than most people's cars, a delicate teacup balanced in her hands with the practiced ease of someone who had been taking tea in formal settings since childhood. Her expression was serene, animated by the genuine pleasure that came from reconnecting with valued friends—people whose company brought both social satisfaction and subtle business advantages.

Seated in two ornate armchairs opposite her mother were the Morgensterns, and seeing them again in person sent shock waves through Momo's nervous system that she fought desperately to conceal.

Mrs. Morgenstern—Annelise, though Momo doubted that was her real name or even her original name—sat with the kind of perfect posture that suggested bones made of steel and a spine that had never known doubt. Her short blonde hair was styled in a severe bob that framed a face that managed to be both beautiful and somehow unsettling, as if classical perfection had been achieved through means that weren't entirely natural. She wore a black turtleneck beneath a simple white shawl-like sweater, the kind of understated elegance that only the truly confident could carry off.

A pair of delicate, round glasses perched on her nose, their lenses catching the light in ways that made it impossible to read her eyes clearly. Her expression was poised and thoughtful as she listened to Momo's mother speak, nodding at appropriate moments with the kind of engaged attention that made people feel heard and valued.

But there was something in the way she held herself, something in the precise control of every micro-expression, that spoke of someone playing a role so thoroughly that the performance had become indistinguishable from reality.

Beside her sat Mr. Morgenstern—Dominic, if that name had any more validity than his wife's—and the sight of him made Momo's breath catch in her throat. He had the same short, blonde hair as his companion, styled with casual precision that suggested expensive salons and careful attention to detail. But it was his eyes that drew and held attention: piercing yellow orbs that seemed to hold depths of knowledge and experience that no human gaze should contain.

He was dressed in a well-tailored brown blazer over a black turtleneck and light-colored trousers, every element chosen to project an image of casual European elegance. His charming grin was in place as he leaned forward, nodding politely at something Momo's mother had said, the picture of an attentive and sophisticated dinner guest.

But that smile—God, that smile held edges that spoke of appetites and hungers that had nothing to do with cuisine or conversation. To the untrained eye, he was simply a handsome, friendly businessman with impeccable taste and Old World charm. To Momo, armed with impossible knowledge, that smile belonged to something that had walked out of humanity's oldest nightmares and learned to wear tailored clothing.

"Here is our daughter now, a truly brilliant girl," her father said, his voice full of paternal pride as he guided Momo into the room with a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Momo, you remember Mr. and Mrs. Morgenstern, of course?"

Momo managed a practiced, polite curtsy that had been drilled into her since childhood, her body moving through the familiar motions while her mind screamed warnings that her survival instincts couldn't quite articulate. "It's a pleasure to see you again," she said, her voice sounding unnaturally steady even to her own ears—a testament to years of social conditioning that had taught her to maintain composure even when her world was collapsing around her.

Annelise's gaze landed on Momo with analytical intensity that made her skin prickle as if she were being examined under a microscope. The woman's eyes, magnified slightly by her glasses, seemed to catalog every detail—posture, expression, the subtle signs of tension that no amount of training could completely hide.

"My, you've grown, dear," she said, her voice carrying that musical quality that Momo remembered from their previous meeting, now laden with significance she was only beginning to understand. "And your intellect—it positively shines. It's a marvelous thing to witness such potential blooming into something truly remarkable."

The words were a compliment, perfectly appropriate for the social context, but to Momo they felt like something entirely different. A cosmic evaluation delivered with surgical precision, a judgment rendered by beings whose understanding of 'potential' operated on scales that human language couldn't adequately express.

Dominic's smile widened as he gave a slight nod, yellow eyes tracking Momo's movement with the kind of attention that apex predators reserved for particularly interesting prey. "We've heard all about your recent... activities," he said, his voice warm with what sounded like genuine admiration but felt like something much more dangerous. "Very impressive, very impressive indeed. You're certainly making a name for yourself at that school of yours."

Momo's heart pounded against her ribs with the force of trapped birds trying to escape a cage that was rapidly shrinking. He was referring not to her grades or academic achievements—those mundane accomplishments that had once seemed so important—but to the events she and her classmates had recently endured. The hidden meaning behind his casual words was unmistakable, delivered with the precision of a master manipulator who found genuine pleasure in psychological chess games.

He knew. They both knew. And they were here, in her family's home, treating her like a valuable asset they were evaluating for purchase—or perhaps like a promising investment whose growth they had been monitoring with professional interest.

"Thank you, sir," Momo said, her mind racing to find an innocuous-sounding reply that wouldn't reveal the depth of her terror or the extent of her knowledge. "I'm just doing my best."

"Just your best, she says!" her father chuckled, completely oblivious to the tense undercurrents flowing beneath the surface of polite conversation like riptides in calm-looking water. "Such a humble child. Please, sit down, my dear. I'll have the staff bring you a cup of tea."

Momo settled into a chair with movements that felt stiff and mechanical, her back ramrod straight as years of deportment training took over when conscious thought became too overwhelming. She forced a small smile onto her face, the kind of expression that had been photographed thousands of times for society pages and charity events.

On the surface, it was just a tea party with family friends—the kind of social obligation that filled the calendars of the wealthy and well-connected. But beneath the veneer of polite conversation and fine china, an impossible game was being played, and Momo was now a piece on a board whose rules she was only beginning to understand.

The thought was terrifying, but it also brought with it a cold, hard clarity that cut through the fog of social conditioning and inherited privilege. She was not just a student anymore, not just an heir to industrial fortune, not just a young woman learning to navigate the complexities of adult responsibility.

She was now a player in a cosmic game, whether she wanted to be or not. And she would have to learn the rules of this new reality fast, or risk becoming just another casualty in conflicts that operated on scales beyond human comprehension.

The realization settled over her like armor made of ice and determination: if she was going to survive this, she would need to become something more than she had ever imagined possible.

Momo tried to make herself invisible, to become just another piece of expensive furniture in the opulent room that surrounded them like a stage set designed to project wealth and stability. Her teacup remained untouched on its saucer, the delicate china growing cold as she feigned interest in conversation that had mercifully moved away from her and back to the adults' shared interests—the familiar territory of business partnerships and international investments.

"The new resort has been a smashing success, Dominic," her father was saying, his voice carrying the jovial satisfaction of a man whose investments continued to exceed expectations. "The photos you sent were simply breathtaking. The ski slopes alone must have required extraordinary engineering expertise."

"We're quite pleased with it," Annelise replied, her voice flowing like silk over steel, each word precisely modulated to convey both modesty and pride in perfect balance. "It was a labor of love, truly. The natural hot springs, you see, were a particular challenge to integrate with the existing infrastructure, but the result has been well worth the effort and expense."

Momo's mind refused to engage with the polite chatter that filled the air like expensive perfume—suffocating in its artificial sweetness, designed to mask whatever lay beneath. The words were just noise, a white-noise hum of business and luxury that had been the soundtrack of her entire life. But now that soundtrack felt like a elaborate performance, a carefully orchestrated distraction from realities that operated on entirely different levels.

What felt real in this room—what demanded her attention with the persistence of a physical weight—was the subtle, undeniable pressure of Dominic's observation. He wasn't looking at her directly, his handsome head turned toward her father as he engaged in perfectly appropriate social conversation. But she could feel it anyway, that sense of being evaluated that transcended simple visual attention.

It was the same sensation she'd experienced in the classroom when her world had first begun to reshape itself around impossible truths, but magnified now by the intimate setting and the knowledge of exactly what she was dealing with. The feeling of being seen—truly seen—by something that existed outside the normal rules of human interaction.

When she had been ignorant, it had simply been a peculiar quality about the man, the kind of unsettling charisma that some people possessed without explanation. Now, armed with cosmic knowledge, it was the focused attention of a being whose very existence redefined concepts like 'attention' and 'interest' and 'evaluation.'

She gripped the arms of her chair with white-knuckled intensity, trying to appear composed while her nervous system screamed warnings in languages older than conscious thought. She focused on the crystal prisms of the chandelier above them, counting individual facets with desperate precision, anything to keep her mind from spinning out of control under the weight of impossible circumstances.

"And how are you finding U.A., dear?" her mother's voice broke through the haze of her concentration like a lifeline thrown to a drowning person, her tone laced with the kind of maternal concern that had once been Momo's anchor in uncertain social waters.

Momo's head snapped back to attention with jarring suddenness, the question hitting her awareness like cold water. "I'm sorry, Mother?"

"You've been rather distant just now," her mother observed, a delicate frown creasing her brow—the kind of expression that spoke of genuine worry beneath the careful composure. "Is everything all right? You seem... preoccupied."

The sudden scrutiny felt like a spotlight trained on a stage she wasn't prepared to perform on. Three pairs of adult eyes focused on her with varying degrees of concern and interest, and under normal circumstances, she would have deflected with practiced ease, redirecting attention away from her internal state with the kind of social grace that had been bred into her bones.

But these weren't normal circumstances, and the weight of cosmic knowledge made even simple deflection feel like navigating a minefield while blindfolded.

"Yes, of course, Mother. I apologize," she managed, drawing on reserves of composure she wasn't sure she still possessed. "I'm afraid I'm just a little tired. We've been preparing extensively for the upcoming interschool examinations."

A look of mild disbelief crossed her mother's face—the expression of someone who knew her daughter well enough to recognize when explanations didn't quite ring true. But before she could press the issue, before the conversation could veer into more dangerous territory, Dominic's voice cut in with the kind of perfect timing that suggested either remarkable social intuition or something far more calculated.

"Ah, the fatigue of youth," he said with a knowing chuckle that somehow managed to sound both sympathetic and predatory, his charming grin perfectly calibrated to project understanding and concern. "It can be quite taxing, the rigors of a top-tier education. The pressure to excel, to meet expectations that seem to grow higher with each passing semester."

He was looking at Momo directly now, those unsettling yellow eyes fixed on her with an intensity that made her skin crawl with recognition. "I, for one, found my own school years quite draining. The constant evaluation, the sense that every moment was a test of one's worth and potential."

Her parents exchanged a quick look, the kind of silent communication that long-married couples developed over decades of shared experience. The tension that had been building around Momo's distraction began to dissipate under Dominic's reassuring intervention, dissolved by the authority of someone who clearly understood the challenges facing exceptional young people.

"He's right, my dear," her father conceded with a wave of his hand that dismissed her concerns with paternal confidence. "The pressure you're under would challenge anyone. Go and rest—you'll need your energy for the examinations."

The relief that washed over Momo was so profound it almost made her weak at the knees. She managed a small, grateful smile that was only partially performance. "Thank you. Please, excuse me."

She rose from her chair with movements that were carefully controlled despite the adrenaline coursing through her system, each motion deliberate and measured to avoid betraying the depth of her agitation. A small bow to the guests—perfectly proper, socially appropriate, giving away nothing of the cosmic horror churning in her thoughts.

As she walked toward the door, she could still feel Dominic's gaze on her like a physical presence. It pressed against her back with the weight of evaluation and assessment, and this time there was no pretense of polite inattention. He was simply watching her go with the kind of focus that spoke of genuine interest—not the casual observation of a family friend, but the calculating attention of something that had found her worthy of closer study.

She was just passing through the doorway, just beginning to believe she might escape this encounter with her sanity intact, when she heard a low, almost affectionate whisper from behind her.

"Now, now, Dominic. Do be a dear and try not to stare quite so hard."

The sound that followed was soft but unmistakable—a gentle flick, as if someone had been tapped on the nose or ear in playful admonishment. Then came a low chuckle that held notes of amusement and something that might have been fondness, if beings like these were capable of such mundane emotions.

The exchange was brief, quiet enough that her parents probably dismissed it as private conversation between long-married spouses. But to Momo, walking away with her back still crawling under that impossible gaze, it carried a message as clear as if it had been shouted: this was not a social visit.

This was reconnaissance. And she was the target.

Once safely out of sight, Momo hurried to her room with steps that gradually increased in speed until she was nearly running by the time she reached her door. The composure she had so carefully maintained crumbled the moment the barrier clicked shut behind her, leaving her alone with the full weight of what had just occurred.

She sank onto the edge of her bed, pulling out her phone with hands that trembled despite her best efforts to control them. The device felt impossibly heavy as she stared at the group chat icon for Class 1-A, her mind a whirlwind of fear and disbelief that made coherent thought feel like an impossible luxury.

The literal devil and his wife—an angel who had chosen exile from heaven to stay by his side—were sitting in her family's sitting room, discussing business ventures and sipping tea from china that cost more than most people's monthly salaries. The mundane absurdity of it all made her want to laugh and scream in equal measure.

Cosmic beings whose very existence defied human understanding were here for what her parents believed was a simple dinner party. They had complimented the catering, discussed market trends, and made polite inquiries about her academic progress as if they were any other successful business couple making social calls.

She should tell the others, she knew. Her friends—her classmates who had become something like family through shared trials that most people would never experience—they had a right to know. They were all in this cosmic game together now, whether they understood the rules or not.

But what would she even say? How could she possibly explain this without sounding like she'd finally snapped under the pressure of recent revelations? 'Hey guys, the fallen angel who runs a multinational corporation and his wife who might be a Seraph are having tea with my parents right now. They asked about my grades and complimented my intellectual development. See you tomorrow!'

The thought was so ridiculous it almost made her laugh—a hysterical sound that died in her throat before it could escape. For now, she decided, it could wait. The Morgensterns hadn't done anything overtly threatening or inappropriate. In fact, they'd been impeccably polite and charming, the kind of dinner guests that any host would be delighted to entertain.

It was a terrifying thought, but in all likelihood, they wouldn't start revealing their true nature now. Her immediate concern was surviving the rest of their visit without betraying the depth of her knowledge or the extent of her terror.

Her attention was drawn from her phone when she remembered the next scheduled event: dinner. The sudden realization that she would have to face them again, sit at the same table and make polite conversation while cosmic forces evaluated her potential over perfectly prepared courses, caused her to gently knock the screen of her phone against her forehead.

The sound was a dull thud that seemed to echo in the sudden silence of her room, but it was enough to refocus her scattered thoughts on the immediate challenges ahead. She would need to bathe, change into appropriate dinner attire, and prepare herself for several more hours of the most surreal social performance of her life.

Slipping out of her school uniform, she made her way to the opulent bathroom that adjoined her suite. The space was larger than many people's entire bedrooms, all marble surfaces and gold fixtures that spoke of wealth accumulated over generations. She filled the oversized tub with water hot enough to fog the mirrors, adding bath salts that filled the air with the calming aroma of lavender and ylang-ylang.

The steam and fragrance provided a welcome distraction from the cosmic horror simmering in her mind, but even as she sank into water that felt like liquid silk against her skin, she couldn't escape the weight of what was happening. Somewhere below, in her family's dining room, preparations were being made for an evening that would redefine her understanding of normal social interaction.

Once she was out and dried, maids appeared as if summoned by telepathy—a routine she had experienced her entire life but which now felt oddly surreal. They helped her dress with practiced efficiency, their movements so familiar they barely registered on her consciousness. She chose a simple but elegant dress, the cool fabric a soothing presence against skin that still prickled with residual anxiety.

The deep blue silk complemented her dark hair and pale complexion while projecting exactly the right combination of youth and sophistication. The dress was expensive without being ostentatious, fashionable without being trendy—perfect for a family dinner with important guests.

The maids finished their work with the kind of swift professionalism that only unlimited resources could buy, leaving her to check her appearance in the full-length mirror one final time. She looked exactly as she was supposed to: composed, elegant, and perfectly in control. A flawless facade concealing a whirlwind of internal panic that no amount of expensive clothing could disguise.

Taking one last deep breath—drawing air into lungs that felt constricted by more than just anticipation—she made her way downstairs to the dining hall, where her family and the Morgensterns were already waiting.

The formal dining room gleamed under the soft light of yet another crystal chandelier, its long mahogany table set with the family's finest china and silver. Each place setting was a work of art in miniature—multiple forks arranged with mathematical precision, crystal glasses that caught and refracted the light into tiny rainbows, napkins folded into shapes that spoke of staff training that bordered on the obsessive.

The meal progressed with the careful choreography of high society—multiple courses served by nearly invisible staff who moved with the kind of practiced efficiency that made their presence feel more like natural phenomena than human service. Wine was poured with ritualistic precision, each vintage selected to complement specific courses in ways that required both extensive knowledge and considerable expense.

Conversation flowed around topics of international business and mutual acquaintances, the kind of discussion that required intimate knowledge of global markets and political movements. Names were dropped with casual authority—ministers and CEOs and cultural figures whose decisions shaped nations and whose approval could make or break entire industries.

Momo sat in her designated chair, spine straight and hands properly folded in her lap, the very picture of a well-bred young lady who had been trained from birth to navigate these rarefied social waters. But inside, her mind churned with the impossible knowledge of who was sharing her family's table, of what these beings represented and what their presence in her home might mean for her future.

She moved through the motions mechanically—lifting her fork at appropriate intervals, nodding politely when addressed, offering the occasional "Yes, Mother" or "How interesting" when conversation demanded acknowledgment. Years of social conditioning took over when conscious thought became too overwhelming, allowing her to maintain the facade of normalcy while her world continued to reshape itself around cosmic forces that operated according to rules she barely comprehended.

The Morgensterns were everything she remembered and more: cultured, charming, and utterly at ease in the rarefied atmosphere of old money and older privilege. Annelise discussed market trends with the same elegant precision she might use to arrange flowers, her voice carrying the authority of someone who understood global economics at levels that transcended simple academic knowledge.

Dominic regaled her parents with amusing anecdotes about Swiss banking regulations and international trade agreements, stories that had everyone laughing at exactly the right moments with the kind of timing that spoke of either natural charisma or supernatural understanding of human psychology.

They were perfect dinner guests—absolutely, terrifyingly perfect in ways that made their very presence feel like performance art elevated to cosmic levels.

"The vineyard acquisition should finalize next quarter," her father was saying, gesturing with his wine glass in a way that suggested complete satisfaction with both the beverage and the world that had provided it. "The Bordeaux region has such potential for expansion, especially with the climate variations creating new opportunities for innovative viticulture."

"Oh, absolutely," Annelise agreed, her amber eyes bright with what appeared to be genuine interest but which Momo now recognized as something far more complex. "Dominic and I have been considering similar investments. There's something to be said for... cultivating things that improve with age, that develop complexity and depth through careful tending over extended periods."

The way she said it made Momo's skin crawl with recognition, though she couldn't articulate exactly why. There were layers to the woman's words, meanings that danced just beyond the edge of comprehension like shadows cast by lights that existed in dimensions human eyes couldn't perceive.

"Speaking of cultivation," her mother interjected smoothly, her voice carrying the practiced ease of someone who had spent decades facilitating conversations between powerful people, "how are your resort projects progressing? The photographs you sent of the Alpine property were absolutely stunning—like something out of a fairy tale."

"Thriving beyond our most optimistic expectations," Dominic replied with that charming smile that never quite seemed to reach his unsettling yellow eyes. "We've found that creating... sanctuaries... for those who appreciate the finer things in life tends to be quite profitable. People are willing to pay handsomely for a taste of paradise, especially when that paradise is crafted with genuine attention to their deepest desires."

Another perfectly innocent statement that somehow felt loaded with significance that operated on multiple levels simultaneously. Momo forced herself to take another bite of the expertly prepared salmon, though it might as well have been sawdust for all she could taste through the fog of anxiety that seemed to coat everything with the flavor of impending revelation.

The conversation flowed around her like water around a stone—talk of investments and partnerships, mutual friends in positions of power and influence, the kind of discussion that moved billions of dollars and reshaped international relationships with casual observations over perfectly prepared food.

Her parents were clearly delighted to be reconnecting with such sophisticated associates, their pleasure evident in every gesture and expression. The Morgensterns seemed genuinely pleased to be there as well, their engagement with the conversation appearing completely authentic despite everything Momo now knew about their true nature.

It was all so normal, so utterly mundane, that she began to wonder if stress had finally caused her to snap completely. Perhaps she was sitting here having dinner with perfectly ordinary business partners while her mind constructed elaborate fantasies about cosmic conspiracies and fallen angels who discussed quarterly earnings with the same precision they once applied to celestial warfare.

The thought was almost comforting—madness was at least comprehensible, operating according to psychological principles that could be understood and treated. Reality that included cosmic beings attending dinner parties was far more disturbing because it suggested that everything she thought she understood about the world was fundamentally inadequate.

Then Dominic set down his wine glass with deliberate precision and turned his attention directly to her, yellow eyes fixing on her face with the kind of focus that made every nerve in her body scream warnings.

"Oh, by the way," he said, his tone as casual as discussing tomorrow's weather forecast, each word delivered with the kind of perfect inflection that made casual conversation sound like poetry, "how is Michael doing these days?"

The question hit Momo with more force than she would have expected, stopping her fork halfway to her mouth as if the simple act of eating had suddenly become impossible to coordinate. Her wide eyes fixed on his face with the desperate intensity of someone trying to solve a puzzle whose solution might determine whether she lived or died.

The rest of the table continued their meal with the comfortable rhythms of people who found nothing unusual about the inquiry, apparently processing it as just another polite question about mutual acquaintances.

"I'm sorry?" she managed, her voice barely above a whisper that seemed to echo in her own ears like a shout.

Dominic tilted his head slightly with the kind of patient expression that teachers used with slow students, though the amusement dancing in his yellow eyes suggested he was enjoying this exchange far more than any legitimate educator should. "Michael," he repeated, as if the name were perfectly ordinary, as if it didn't carry implications that could reshape her understanding of everything she thought she knew about reality.

"An old associate of mine. I understand he's working at your school now?"

"Who is Michael, dear?" her mother asked, looking between them with the mild curiosity of someone hearing about an acquaintance she didn't recognize. "I don't recall you mentioning anyone by that name."

For a moment that stretched into eternity, Momo couldn't form words. Her mouth opened and closed soundlessly as she struggled with the impossibility of the situation, with the casual way cosmic forces were being discussed over dessert wine and carefully arranged fruit.

How could she possibly explain? How could she even begin to unpack the significance of that simple question without revealing knowledge that would either mark her as insane or draw her even deeper into conflicts that operated on scales beyond human comprehension?

"He's..." she began, then stopped, her voice failing her entirely as the weight of impossible explanations crushed her ability to speak.

Dominic's smile widened just a fraction, and in that subtle expression, Momo caught something that made her blood run cold with recognition. He was enjoying this—the discomfort, the impossible position he'd placed her in, the delicate torture of having to navigate a conversation where every word was a potential minefield that could explode her carefully maintained facade.

"A teacher?" her father asked, setting down his utensils with the focused attention of someone hearing about a potential professional connection that might prove valuable. "I don't believe I'm familiar with any Michael on the U.A. faculty roster. What department does he work in?"

"Oh, hardly a teacher," Dominic replied with a soft chuckle that held notes of amusement only Momo seemed capable of hearing. "He's in maintenance, actually. Janitorial services, if you can imagine such a thing."

The silence that followed was profound—the kind of quiet that absorbed sound and meaning until only the weight of unspoken implications remained. Her parents exchanged a look of genuine surprise that spoke of people trying to reconcile social expectations with unexpected realities.

"A janitor?" her mother repeated, her tone carrying the particular bewilderment of someone discovering that a former colleague had taken up an entirely different profession in a completely different social class. "How... unusual. Wasn't he in your line of work previously?"

"Oh yes," Dominic said, his voice warm with what sounded like fond memory but which Momo now recognized as something far more complex and dangerous. "We were in the same business for quite some time, actually. Worked very closely together on a number of... projects. But you know how it is in family enterprises."

He paused, taking a delicate sip of wine that seemed choreographed for maximum dramatic effect. "Sometimes philosophical disagreements arise. Differences of opinion about management styles, corporate direction, the fundamental nature of the work itself."

The way he said 'family enterprises' made something twist in Momo's stomach with the recognition of cosmic wordplay that operated on levels her parents couldn't possibly comprehend.

"That's quite a career change," her father mused, his business mind clearly trying to process what could cause such a dramatic shift in circumstances. "Economic troubles? Bad investments? Corporate restructuring?"

"Something like that," Dominic agreed, and now Momo could see the amusement dancing openly in his eyes as he delivered cosmic jokes wrapped in mundane explanations. "Let's just say he had a... philosophical disagreement with upper management about the direction the company was taking. These things happen in family businesses, you understand. Sometimes the most talented employees find themselves at odds with executive decisions."

Family businesses. The words hung in the air like smoke, and Momo felt the room spin slightly around her as the implications crashed over her in waves. She gripped the edge of the table with white-knuckled intensity, trying to maintain her composure while cosmic forces discussed their personal drama over perfectly prepared vegetables and expensive wine.

"Well," her mother said with the determined politeness of someone trying to find the bright side of an awkward situation, "I'm sure he's making the best of his circumstances. Education is certainly a noble field, even in support roles. There's dignity in all honest work."

"Oh, I'm quite certain he is," Dominic replied, and when his yellow gaze met Momo's across the table, she saw something that made her breath catch in her throat like a physical obstruction. "Michael has always been very... dedicated to his responsibilities, no matter how his circumstances may have changed. He's the type who takes his duties seriously, regardless of how far he might have... fallen... from his previous position."

The way he emphasized the word 'fallen' was so subtle that her parents missed it entirely, processing it as nothing more than a natural description of career setbacks. But to Momo, armed with impossible knowledge, it was a private joke delivered with surgical precision—cosmic wordplay that transformed casual conversation into something that felt like psychological warfare.

The rest of the dinner passed in a haze that felt more like survival than social interaction. Momo managed to nod and smile at appropriate moments, managed to finish her meal without dropping her silverware, managed to maintain the facade of normalcy while her world continued to reshape itself around impossible truths delivered with the casual precision of entities who found genuine pleasure in the chaos they created.

But through it all, she could feel Dominic's attention like a weight on her skin, and she knew with absolute certainty that this entire evening—this perfectly orchestrated revelation disguised as casual dinner conversation—had been intended for her alone.

A message wrapped in mundane pleasantries, delivered with the precision of beings who had spent eternity learning how to communicate in ways that transcended simple language.

The game had begun, and she was no longer just a spectator.